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ABSTRACT

Ways in which a teaching and research program can help train agricultural extension staff in information and communication are presented. Teaching provides the resources of materials, techniques, and teachers themselves. Research provides results concerning the analysis of communication problems, audience information, the efficiency and effectiveness of media services, and the form of messages. Three assumptions are made about the ideal organization of information training activities: (1) there is central administrative control and direction over the information, training, and teaching functions; (2) staff members who are training have joint appointments in information offices; and (3) communication pathways between cooperating units are direct, not via administrative hierarchies. Research can aid training through: (1) researching trainees to find out their information abilities and habits and what they want in training; (2) research of agents' use of mass media; and (3) audience understanding of technical terms. A teaching program aids training through the ready-to-use materials, methods, and teachers it provides. It is recommended that the AAACE invest in a centralized accumulation of existing training materials from all states. (KM)

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Using Techniques and Materials Developed in the Classroom and Communication Research Results for Training Extension Staff

or

"What good does a teaching and research program do in training people in information and communication?"

Available Resources

Let's start with what you have to work with. What resources does a teaching-research program provide for training purposes?

Teaching provides three obvious resources:

* Teaching materials, previously prepared, tried and evaluated
* Teaching techniques related to teaching objectives, tested and evaluated
* Teachers themselves, experienced and evaluated

Research provides results which tell you something about:

* How to analyze communication problems and situations
* Audience information needs and use of information
* Efficiency and effectiveness of media services
* The appropriate form of messages

Some Assumptions

Before we talk about applying these resources to a training program, we ought to make some assumptions about the ideal organization of information training activities.

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We make three assumptions. The first is that there is central administrative control and direction over the information, training, and teaching functions. Either the chief editor ought to have administrative responsibility for training programs, or someone over him in overall information support should have. It is difficult to organize effective training where teaching, information programs and training functions are separately administered. I try to coordinate these functions at Wisconsin, but to gain additional within-department coordination, another staff member, John Fett, serves as training leader.

A second assumption is that staff members doing the training ought to have joint appointments in information offices. Put another way, the trainer ought to be the information worker, or he ought to be the regular classroom teacher, or preferably both. A classroom teacher's head is assumed to be full of ready-to-apply communication theory and principles. The information expert is expected to have working knowledge of media and message preparation. The teacher-editor, as an expert in both areas, has a unique base of knowledge and skill for training.

We certainly cannot afford to have trainers separate from regular information and teaching personnel. Yet at Wisconsin that attempt was made with the formation of a separate program and staff development unit in Extension. The unit was given unilateral and complete responsibility to develop

and coordinate all training programs. This delegation of authority could have left Ag Journalism high and dry. It required us to revitalize our training program and to seek training opportunities in order to maintain control and input. We didn't mind revitalizing our training to do a better training job, but we hated to do it just to protect our interest and control.

A third assumption is that communication pathways between cooperating units ought to be direct, not via administrative hierarchies. The trainer must be able to draw directly on expertise in the information program, the teaching unit, and the research unit without going through his administrator. But if such formal arrangements are necessary, we need long-term agreements to help training programs get access to information and staff, instead of having to make such arrangements on a one-at-a-time, ad hoc basis whenever training opportunities present themselves.

Relating Research to Training

Back to the topic -- let's apply communication research approaches and results to our training needs. What kind of research and evaluation ought you to do, or what can research and evaluation tell you that will give you a stronger training program?

First of all, before beginning a training venture or session, you ought to research the trainees. Whether the trainees are state-based faculty or specialists, county-level

staff or agents, mass media personnel, or other communicators, you need two types of information from them before planning a training session.

You need to know what their current status is regarding information abilities and habits. We try to find out answers to such questions as the trainees' mass media use, their attitudes toward media and information work, the need for specific types of information, their preferences for forms of messages and frequency of use, etc.

Second, you need to know what trainees want in a training session -- what do they perceive as their communication problems, what subjects do they prefer to receive training in? To get this information for planning training sessions, we send a one-page questionnaire to the list of prospective trainees, asking their training preferences and we also request samples of their previous work. We then analyze both what they say they want, and what their previous work says they need. Thus the training they receive is automatically more relevant, and more efficiently given. This type of research and evaluation gives information that is extremely useful not just in training but in administering an information program. A year ago, Nellie McCannon of our staff recognized that home economics extension state specialists at Wisconsin were not participating fully in our media-service work. We thought perhaps they needed a training session, so we did some research to find out why they were reluctant to help prepare news or

use other media. The study showed that these specialists had a lack of understanding of where news went, the extent to which media actually used news, and the benefits perceived by media personnel and readers. We decided that regular feedback to these faculty concerning media use and reader interest should make them feel more like investing time in message preparation. This research told us to invest training time not in how to prepare messages, but in why they should be prepared.

A second example of how research aids our training program. Before planning recent training for county agents, we analyzed their use of newspaper columns. We content analyzed all Wisconsin weekly newspapers for a one month period, counting the number of columns, the column inches, subjects, source of the information, column identification, etc. This information helped us decide how the columns could be improved, and we worked this directly into our training sessions. We also were able to quantify an information job well done.

Often we have existing research results that relate directly to a trainee group. One area concerns audience understanding of technical terms. Research on audience understanding of technical cooperative terms helps us teach cooperative editors which terms to use. Research on pesticide, soil, dairy and economic terms helps us in training extension personnel in appropriate levels of writing. You can think of

other areas of communication research that have direct application in a training program. We counted the types of research results we had used in a week's training session for foreign extension information leaders last month -- ten different areas of communication research had been worked into the training course with no conscious attempt at doing so.

Relating Teaching to Training

Our teaching program gives us ready-to-use materials, methods, and teachers. Since our Agricultural Journalism department teaches courses covering a variety of communication theories and principles, media and methods, we have an accumulation of materials easily adapted to a particular training session.

If we wish to teach newswriting, for example, we can take our newswriting course examples and, if subject matter needs changing, quickly adapt the examples to the communication problems our pre-training investigation has shown the trainees are most interested in. If we wish to teach visual preparation, we already have prepared a list of principles to consider in judging the effectiveness of a visual and actual samples showing application of the principles. And so on. The point is, if you don't have an ag journalism unit or other journalism unit connected with your editorial operation, look for the nearest one as a source of already prepared materials you can adapt for training purposes. Starting from scratch to develop your own materials is time-consuming and costly.

From the teaching program you can borrow knowledge of methods. Do you know when to use the lecture, or programmed learning, or demonstration, or workshop, or discussion? Do you know when and how to videotape, or use other methods of feedback in the learning process? People who have daily or regular experience with these methods in the classroom know some of the answers here, and they also know something of what makes a student tick. They can anticipate trainee problems and questions.

Thus you have teachers or trainers who already know how to train -- not only regular staff members, but also media people, commercial experts and others who have proven their teaching ability in the classroom. You can thus expand your training staff with some certainty in the skills and effectiveness of the teachers.

What we are suggesting here is that a trainer with experience in research and classroom teaching will do a better job than an editor without such experience. I am certain that this is not always true, however, and it certainly doesn't have to be. Anyone can learn to take an analytical approach to communications training. Among other things, this means putting emphasis on the communication problem and the situation the trainee faces, knowing his communication objectives, selecting principles that best apply, choosing media for a given purpose, etc. -- it means not just being concerned with the form of messages and how to use media.

An Approach

Those of you who know Wisconsin will recognize that a rather poorly hidden objective of this brief presentation is to sell some of the benefits of an integrated editorial-teaching-research-training unit. Almost 70 years of this type of operation reinforces our biased belief that professional information and training work is greatly enhanced by close association with teachers and researchers. Thus you can imagine how we are fighting the current trend at Wisconsin to separate these basic functions which made the land-grant system what it is today. These are austere times. But that is no reason to be forced into doing a routine or perfunctory job of training or communication. In fact it calls for the opposite -- greater attention to the real values in the communication process. Unfortunately, when dollars are scarce administrators have two concerns, economy and organization visibility. They forget that the cardinal question is: "Are we getting the right message in a usable form to the audience who needs it, and is the audience receiving and benefiting from it." Instead, they ask, "Is this publication identification logo large enough to be read at 50 paces, or why is the inside of this cover blank, didn't we have a photo to throw in there?" Don't let that type of concern, even if legitimate, keep you from the real issues in information and training work. Tell your trainees and administrators that content counts most; form is secondary.

A Need

Finally, a suggestion for the future, and I hope the immediate future. It has been too many years since the National Project in Agricultural Communications attempted to collect and disseminate materials useful in communications training. I think AAACE ought to invest, as it has done with the AAACE Communications Handbook, in a centralized accumulation of existing training materials from all states. It should collect these materials and description of methods with the objective of then preparing training handbooks for each major medium or training subject. Most of our offices are independently producing such materials, even though the state needs are similar. Such a collaboration would improve training programs in every state and permit us to put most of our training preparation time where it belongs -- into localization of existing professionally-prepared materials and techniques, and into better understanding of trainees' communication problems.

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